

## THE DATING OF LEVELS II AND III IN THE KUYUNJIK GULLY SOUNDING, NINEVEH

Michael ROAF\*

In *al-Rāfidān* 19 (1998) Augusta McMahon published a report on the 1989 and 1990 seasons of excavation in the Kuyunjik Gully Sounding (Area KG) in ancient Nineveh. New information from such an important site is always welcome and in this short note I wish to comment on the sherds published from levels II and III (Fig. 1) in the light of recently published reports on ceramics from northern Mesopotamia.<sup>1)</sup>

### Carinated bowls

“The most common type” in these levels consisted of “carinated bowls, in which the carination varied from a gentle bend to an exaggerated ridge” (Fig. 1.1–9, McMahon 1998: 20–21 and Fig. 12.1–9). These bowls have flat bases and rim diameters between 8.5 and 22 cm. The temper of these 9 sherds is described either as organic (6 examples) or as light organic (3).

The report states that Levels I–III “were Parthian in date” and that “the pottery of Levels I–III was Parthian throughout, except for a few earlier sherds redeposited in foundation fill” and in a foot-note the author tells the reader that “most of these [earlier sherds] were from the third millennium BC but there were a few possibly Hellenistic sherds (*i.e.* Fig. 12.11 [here Fig. 1.11]), which testify to the possible occupation of a portion of Kuyunjik at that time, although no contemporary architectural traces were recovered from Area KG” [McMahon 1998: 19 and note 46]. She also stated that “the complete lack of glazed wares and of stamp-impressed wares is unusual” and suggested the reason for this absence was either chronological (being early in the Parthian period) or was functional [McMahon 1998: 20].

In the Catalogue of pottery McMahon [1998: 29] listed in the right hand column illustrations of pottery from various sites corresponding to the illustrated pottery samples. Although not explicitly stated we may reasonably assume that these references were intended to indicate material comparable to the illustrated sherds and should therefore support her dating of these sherds, and hence the levels in which they were found, to the Parthian period. The carinated bowls (here Fig. 1.1–9) are compared with various bowls published from Nimrud, Uruk, Khirbet Qasrij, Tell ed-Der, Tell Sabra, and Seleucia-on-the-Tigris. The dates of these parallels are given as post-Assyrian, Achaemenid, Hellenistic, Seleucid/Parthian and Parthian, that is covering a period from the sixth century BC to the second century AD.

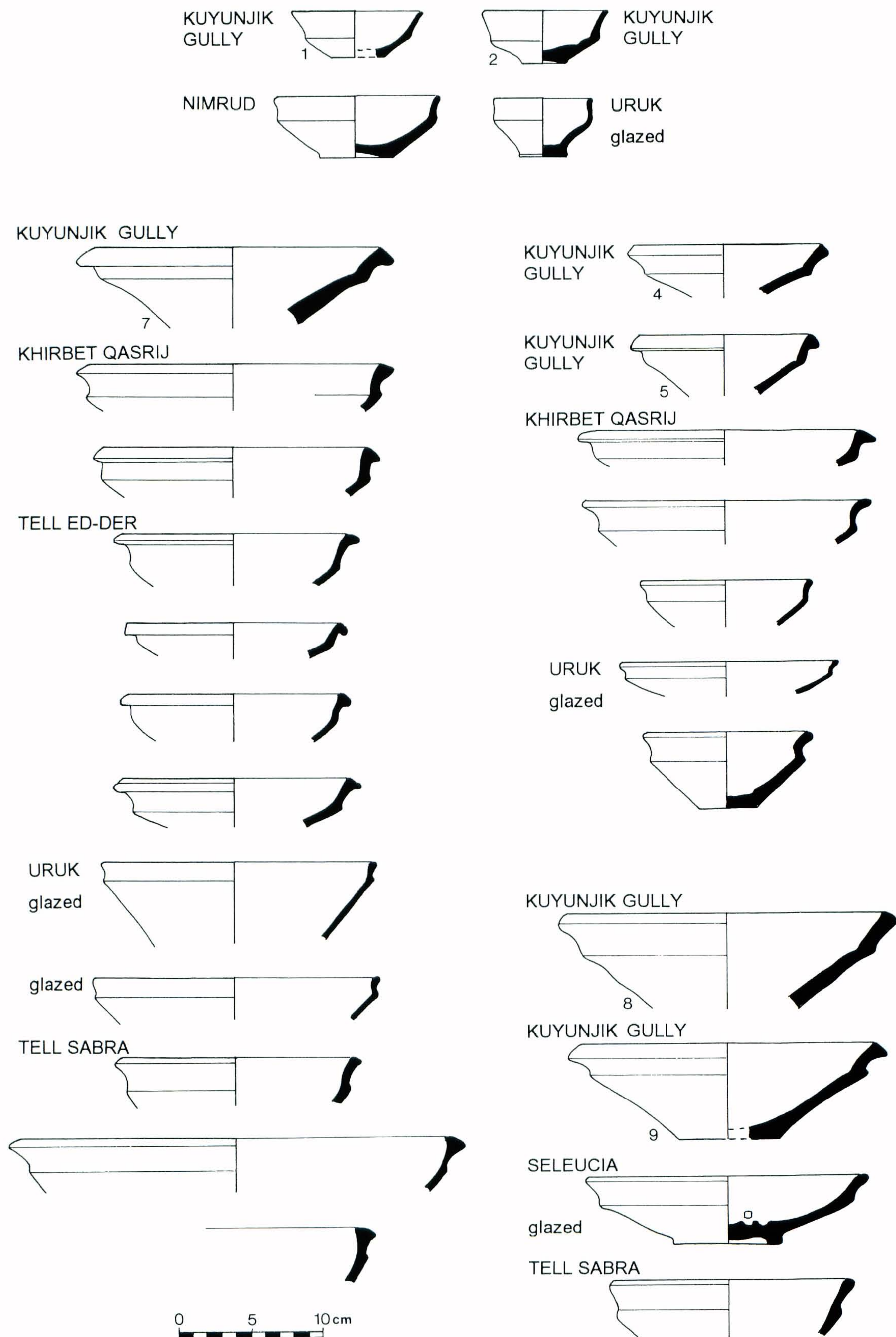
Fig. 2 shows drawings of the bowls from Nineveh and beneath them drawings of the sherds with which they were compared by McMahon. In order to compare them easily they are all drawn to the same scale. Unfortunately the suggested parallels do not have the same shape and stance as the carinated bowls from Nineveh. Furthermore most of them are made from clay with a different temper and

---

\* Institut für Vorderasiatische Archäologie, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Geschwister-Scholl-Platz 1, München 80539, Germany

1) It seems that this report on the Kuyunjik Gully Sounding was written soon after the excavations ended and was only slightly revised before publication. In recent years several studies of second millennium pottery in northern Mesopotamia have been published [Wilkinson and Tucker 1995, Pfälzner 1995, Postgate, Oates, and Oates 1997, Oates, Oates and McDonald 1998]. It is clear that if the author had consulted these works carefully she would not have tried to date the material from the Kuyunjik Gully by comparison with Achaemenid and later pottery from sites in southern Mesopotamia (though see also note 3). Furthermore had the information about the Middle Assyrian pottery from the excavations at Tell Mohammed Arab and other sites in north Mesopotamia been more widely available or published in more detail [Summers n.d., Roaf 1983, Roaf 1984, c.f. Wilkinson and Tucker 1995: 98–100 and Pfälzner 1995: 204–207 Taf. 189–191], the problem with the dating of the levels in the Kuyunjik Gully Sounding might not have arisen.



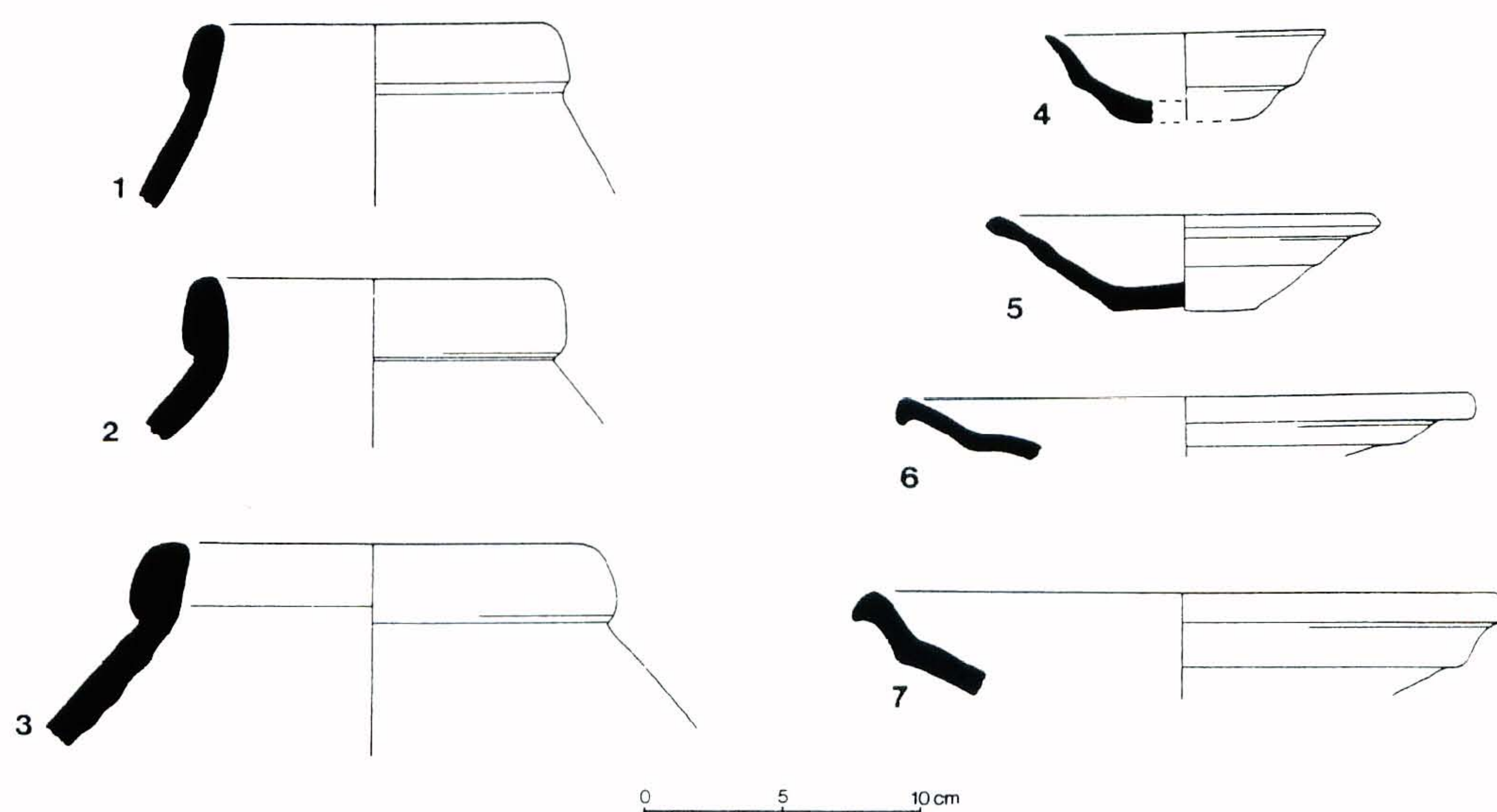


**Fig. 2** The carinated bowls illustrated in Fig. 1.1–9 with parallels suggested in *al-Rāfidān* 19 (see McMahon 1998: 29 for references).



some of them have very different surface treatment to the bowls from Nineveh. To take just four examples: Figs. 1.4 and 1.5 with organic temper are compared to a rimsherd from Khirbet Qasrij [Curtis 1989: Fig. 24.22] with fine white micaceous grit temper and a rim diameter 1.5 times greater than those it is compared with; Fig. 1.7 is compared to two thin walled sherds with whitish glaze on the inside and the outside from the Gareus Temple in Uruk [Duda 1978: Taf. 28.8, 9]; and Fig. 1.9 (with a flat base) is compared to a dark green glazed bowl from Seleucia with a ring base [Debevoise 1934: Fig. 189]. Perhaps it is not surprising that these suggested parallels are not close, because most of the cited examples were found in sites in the south of Mesopotamia which had a very different ceramic assemblage to the north in the Parthian period.<sup>2)</sup>

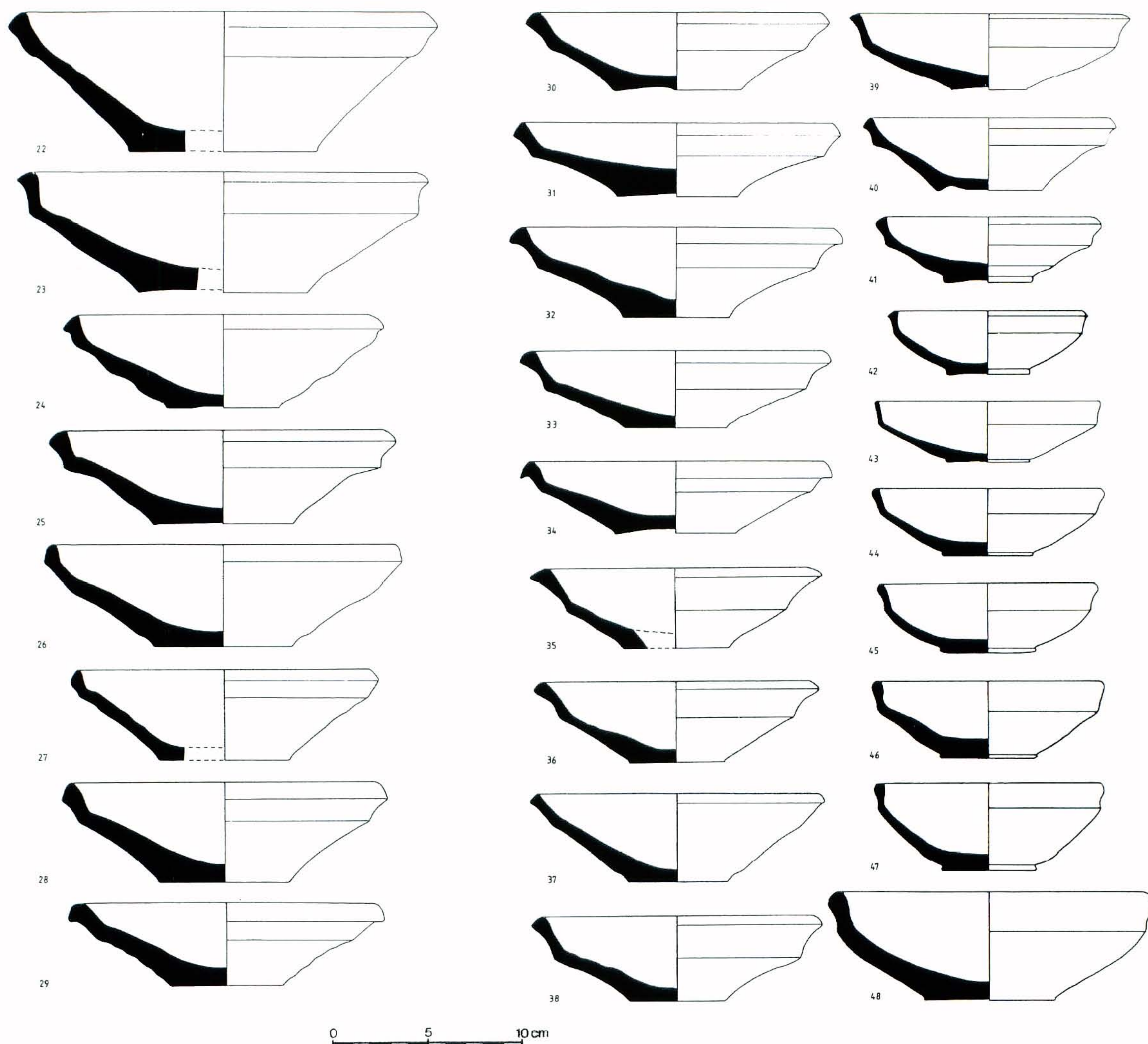
On the other hand these carinated bowls are very similar in shape and ware to a type that is very common (indeed is the commonest pottery type) in northern Iraq, eastern Syria and south-eastern Turkey in the Middle Assyrian period, which is also made out of an organic tempered ware (Figs. 3–5) [Roaf 1984: Fig. 6.15, Postgate, Oates and Oates 1997: 61, Pls. 28–30, Oates, Oates and McDonald 1998: Fig. 181.1–11, Wilkinson and Tucker 1995: 98–100, Pfälzner 1995, Matney 1998: Fig. 6.8–9 on p. 14, Köroğlu 1998: Fig. 5.15–17 and 19–20, Fig. 6.11–12, Fig. 7.1–6 and 9–12 on pp. 43, 45, and 47].<sup>3)</sup> Pfälzner [1995: 169–215] gives references to examples of these bowls from excavations of Middle Assyrian levels in Tell Amuda, Ashur, Tell Barri, Tell Bderi, Tell Billa, Tell Brak, Tell Fakhariyah, Tell Hamidiyah, Hammam et-Turkman, Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta, Mohammed Arab, Tell Mohammad Diyab, Tell al-Rimah, Tell Sabi Abyad, Tell Sheikh Hamad, and Khirbet esh-Shennef.<sup>4)</sup>



**Fig. 3** Some Middle Assyrian pottery diagnostics used in the North Jazirah Project [Wilkinson and Tucker 1995: fig. 72].

- 2) Published Parthian assemblages from northern Iraq include those from Hatra, Ashur, Ain Sinu [Ibrahim 1986, Hauser 1996, Oates and Oates 1959]. These do not include carinated bowls like those found in the Kuyunjik Gully Sounding, but contain other distinctive types such as Brittle Ware which are conspicuous by their absence from the published Kuyunjik Gully pottery.
- 3) The colour of these carinated bowls varies greatly. From Tell Mohammed Arab most were of a buff colour (varying from cream-buff, to reddish-buff), but sherds from similar bowls found in Sheikh Hamad are frequently described by Peter Pfälzner [1995] as pale red, pale green, and green-brown among other colours. Colour descriptions are notoriously inconsistently recorded and in the absence of Munsell Colour Chart designations it seems likely that the description of some of the Nineveh examples as “pink” need not imply that they should be classified differently.
- 4) It may be noted that reports on many of these excavations containing drawings of Middle Assyrian carinated bowls (sometimes attributed to the Mittanian or Neo-Assyrian periods) were published before the Kuyunjik Gully Sounding was excavated and some of these publications are listed in McMahon’s bibliography, but none of these parallels were noted by McMahon, who chose to cite only post-Assyrian and later parallels.





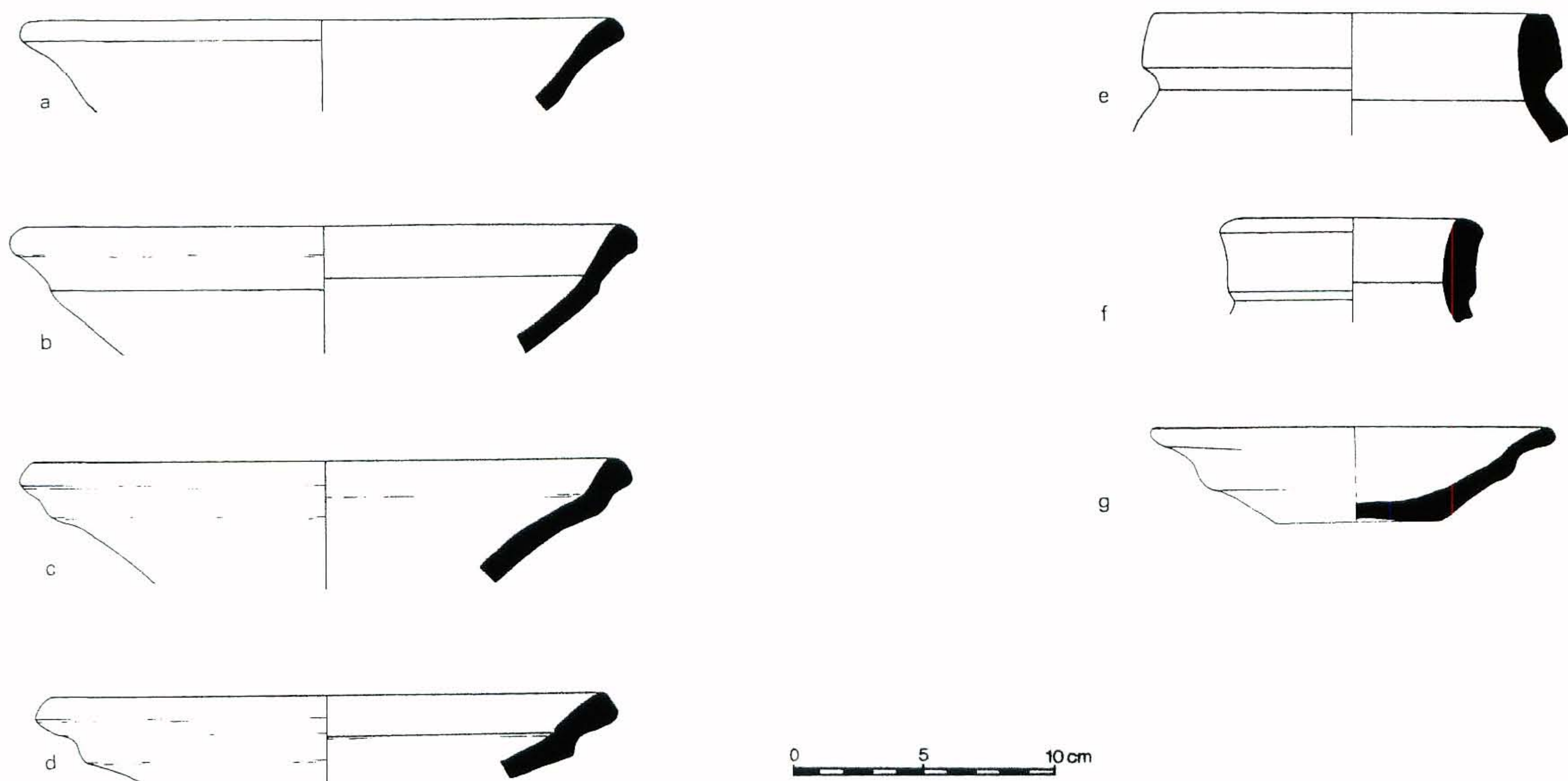
**Fig. 4** Carinated bowls from Tell al-Rimah [Postgate, Oates, and Oates 1997: Pls. 29–30].

It is of course unwise to be dogmatic about sherds that one has not seen and it is possible that similar shapes and wares occur in a single region at different periods, but in this case the close parallels with pottery dated to the Middle Assyrian period and the absence of convincing parallels with pottery from northern Mesopotamia of a different date suggest that the carinated bowls illustrated in Fig. 1 date to the Middle Assyrian period.

### **The pottery from Level III**

Four of these bowls were found in Level III and five in Level II. Five other sherds from Level III are illustrated (Fig. 1.12–13, 17, 19–20). Like the carinated bowls these all have organic temper. Apart from the carinated bowl sherds, only two of the sherds illustrated from Level II have organic temper (Fig. 1.16 and 18). All the organic tempered sherds have parallels in Middle Assyrian assemblages. The large basins (Fig. 1.12 and 13) are more similar in shape to Mittanian and Middle Assyrian bowls from Tell al-Rimah [Postgate, Oates, and Oates 1997: Pls. 35.129–130, 38.186–188, and 39.191–193], Tell Bderi [Pfälzner 1995: Taf. 4f, 20a, 24a and 137a] and Tell Sheikh Hamad [Pfälzner 1995: Taf. 72b, 99a–c, 101a, 101c, and 109a] than they are to the bowls from Uruk, Tell Sabra, and Khirbet Qasrij with which they were compared by McMahon [1998: 29]. The jar rims (Fig. 1.16–19) are common in Middle Assyrian sites (e.g. Figs. 4–5) and, although similar rims are also attested in Hellenistic and other peri-



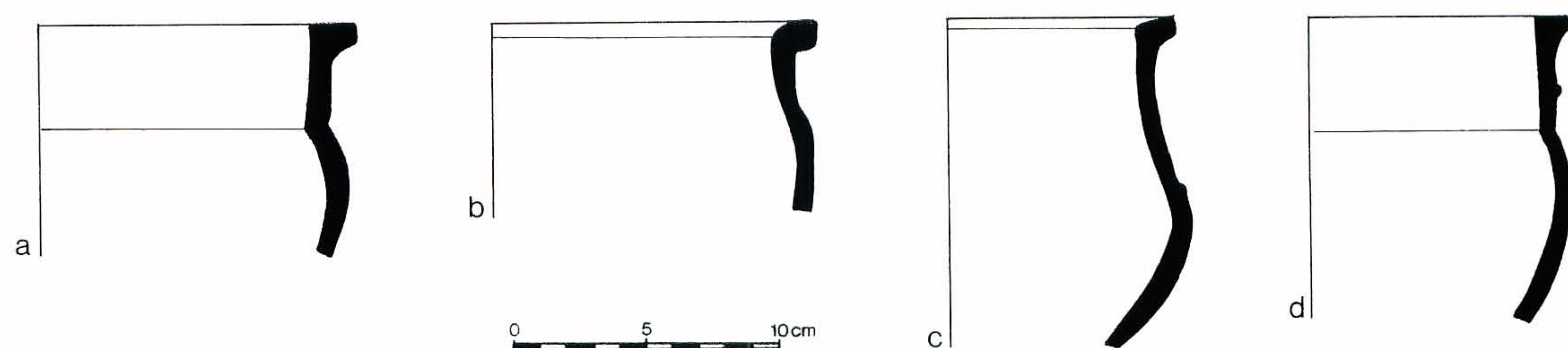


**Fig. 5** Some Middle Assyrian pottery from Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta [Pfälzner 1995: Taf. 193].

ods in north Iraq, because of the temper they are more likely to be of Middle Assyrian date (see below).

The deep bowl sherd with organic temper from Level III (Fig. 1.20, Fig. 6a) was compared by McMahon to a sherd (Fig. 6b) from Tell Sabra in the Hamrin which the excavator dated to the Seleucid/Parthian period. Although the shapes are similar but not identical, a parallel from northern Iraq would be more convincing. Deep bowls with square rims are quite often found in Mittani and early Middle Assyrian levels in northern Iraq and north-east Syria [Wilkinson and Tucker 1995: Type 59], but only occasionally has it been possible to reconstruct the lower parts of the vessels (Fig. 6c–d) and in these cases the shape of the vessel is not unlike that of the sherd from Nineveh.<sup>5)</sup> It would, however, be unwise to place too much emphasis on either the parallel from Tell Sabra or those from north Mesopotamia. The only convincing parallels to the illustrated pottery from Level III are of Middle Assyrian date.

The description of Level III as “a layer of ashy grey debris with many large sherds, broken baked bricks and stones” [McMahon 1998: 19] suggests that none of the material was in its original context and that the bricks and stones (and perhaps the pottery) came from an earlier structure which was



**Fig. 6** Deep bowl rimsherds from a) Nineveh, Area KG Level III (Fig. 1.20), b) Tell Sabra [Tunca 1987: Pl. 77.9], c) Tell al-Rimah [Postgate, Oates, and Oates 1997: no. 508], and d) Tell Mohammed Arab [Summers n.d.: no. 131].

5) Bretschneider [1997: Taf. V.6] publishes a comparable profile from a Mittanian level in Tell Beydar in the Habur region, though the rim is rounded rather than square.



destroyed.<sup>6)</sup> Level III should therefore be dated to the Middle Assyrian period or to a later period.<sup>7)</sup>

### The pottery from Level II

The date of Level II is equally uncertain. While the five carinated bowl sherds and the two organic tempered jar rims are likely to be Middle Assyrian in date, the other sherds from Level II have shapes which are not typical of Middle Assyrian vessels and have tempers which are described as “sand” (Figs. 1.11, 15, 21), “sand and light organic” (Fig. 1.10), “sand & brown grit” (Fig. 1.14), and “white grit” (Fig. 1.22).

In northern Iraq during the Hellenistic, Parthian, and Sassanian periods the pottery is normally sand tempered [e.g. Wilkinson and Tucker 1995: 102–105]. As already pointed out by McMahon Fig. 1.11 looks like a common Hellenistic bowl type (“hemispherical bowl”) found in Nimrud, Balawat, the Saddam Dam Salvage Project and the North Jazira Project [McKenzie 1997: 93; Wilkinson and Tucker: Fig. 75.19 a variant of Type 117) as well as in other Hellenistic sites. Of the other sherds only the handle of Fig. 1.14 is particularly distinctive and for that neither Augusta McMahon nor I can suggest a close parallel. The parallels suggested for the other sand or grit tempered sherds from Level II are unconvincing [McMahon 1998: 29], and in all honesty one should acknowledge that the shapes of these sherds are not distinctive enough to be identified in the present state of our knowledge of the pottery of northern Iraq.

The excavation of Level II revealed a “large wall or area of brick paving, built of a layer of foundation stones with two preserved courses of large mudbrick above (38–40 cm square by 9–12 cm thick)” which covered Level III [McMahon 1998: 19]. This sounds suspiciously like a Neo-Assyrian structure. After this structure had fallen out of use it was cut by a conical storage pit about four metres deep. Conical (bell-shaped) storage pits are particularly characteristic of the Hellenistic period in northern Iraq (e.g. Tell Mohammed Arab [Roaf 1984: 144], Grai Darki [Curtis, Green and Knight 1987–8: 52], Tell Abu Dhahir [Ball 1987: 79], and Tell Fisna [Numoto 1987: 45]).

The published pottery from Level II may include material associated with the brick and stone structure as well as from the pit and can be used to suggest a date for the latest event in Level II which

6) Christoph Gerber [1997–8: 232–234] has recently drawn attention to the problem of residual sherds (Altstücke) being found in later layers and cites examples where more than 50% of the pottery found in a particular level can be shown to belong to an earlier period.

This may be the case with Kuyunjik Gully Sounding Level VIA (a mixed layer of rubble and stones), which McMahon dated to late Akkadian/Ur III [1998: 17 and 19 note 44]. In note 44 she wrote that a few fragments of typical “pie-crust” pot stands were found in Level VIA. This type is normally dated from the early second millennium to the early Middle Assyrian period [Wilkinson and Tucker 1995: 98 and Fig. 70.25, Postgate, Oates and Oates 1997: 73–4 and Pls. 93–4]. Fig. 43 [Postgate, Oates and Oates 1997: 74] shows that these stands are most common in the Mittani period in Tell al-Rimah: the two stands illustrated from 3rd millennium contexts in Tell al-Rimah [Postgate, Oates and Oates 1997: Pls. 93.1119 and 94.1134] do not have the characteristic ledge rims. If the typical “pie-crust” pot stand is restricted to the second millennium, Level VIA in the Kuyunjik Gully Sounding should be dated to the early second millennium or later and the “later third millennium” pottery found in this level was residual like the Ninevite 5 sherds [McMahon 1998: 17].

7) The proposed dating of Levels XII, XI, and X is also problematic. Level XII contained two layers, an earlier one which contained “mainly ash and a great deal of slag” with “a scarcity of sherds” and a later one with lenses of “green and red clay-like soil” [McMahon 1998: 2–3]. According to McMahon [1998: 3] “the pottery of XII is typical of the mid-Ninevite 5 Period, with a combination of painted and incised wares”. She concluded “this level may thus lie chronologically during the occupational gaps which have been postulated between Billa Strata 7 and 6 and Tell Mohammed Arab Periods 2 and 3”, but she added the statement that “a few excised and incised sherds (Fig. 2.16) may indicate that this level continued into late Ninevite 5.” It is more likely that the layer with lenses of green and red clay-like soil was deposited in the late Ninevite 5 period or later and that the earlier Ninevite 5 pottery is residual.

From a study of the pottery in the following level (Level XI), which contained architectural remains, McMahon [1998: 4] concluded “the date is probably approximately the same as that of XII, mid-Ninevite 5,” but since Level XII contained late Ninevite 5 sherds, Level XI must be late Ninevite 5 or later.

Level X had two phases “a building layer (B) followed by a layer in which there was no visible architecture in the excavation area (A)” [McMahon 1998: 5]. McMahon [1998: 6] wrote that Level XB “probably belongs late in the Ninevite 5 Period, to judge from what little pottery was found in good context.” None of the illustrated pottery from Level XB can be dated with certainty to the late Ninevite 5 period and all the distinctive sherds belong to the earlier part of the Ninevite 5 period or earlier and are residual, as McMahon recognised. The dating of Level XB is therefore quite uncertain but it must be later than the late Ninevite 5 sherds found in Level XII.



seems to have been the filling of the pit. The illustrated pottery from Level II includes one sherd which has close Hellenistic parallels. If this sherd came from the conical pit, the brick and stone structure could well be much earlier.<sup>8)</sup>

## Conclusion

The previous remarks are based on drawings and very brief descriptions of only 22 sherds from these levels and so the conclusions must be very tentative. No statistics or information are given concerning the unpublished ceramic material and evidence may exist which could prove that the dating proposed here is incorrect or which could confirm these suggestions.<sup>9)</sup>

The pottery from Level IV, none of which was illustrated, is described by McMahon [1998: 19] as “2nd millennium BC and Parthian”. If this “Parthian” pottery includes carinated bowls like those from Level III, which McMahon thought were of Parthian date, then the pottery from Level IV too is perhaps to be dated to the Middle Assyrian period and Level IV which McMahon suggested might have been “deliberate levelling fill”, would have been deposited in the Middle Assyrian period or later.

The published pottery from Level III is probably Middle Assyrian in date and Level III should therefore date to the Middle Assyrian period or later.

Level II contained pottery from at least two different periods. The excavations identified an earlier phase with a substantial stone and brick wall or pavement and a later phase with a storage pit dug into the ruined remains of the earlier structure. The dating is quite uncertain. The 7 possibly Middle Assyrian sherds might be associated with the earlier structure or they might be earlier and the wall or pavement might have been constructed later, perhaps during the missing Neo-Assyrian period. It is possible that the storage pit should be dated to the Hellenistic period.

Level I consisted of “a baked brick paving” made with bricks “40–41 cm square by only 5 cm thick” [McMahon 1998: 19]. None of the pottery from this level is described or illustrated, so, unless the bricks can be dated, all one can say is that it is later than Level II.

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to John Curtis, Renate Gut, Robert Killick, Joan Oates, St John Simpson, David Stronach

---

8) Details of the findspots are not given in the catalogue and so it is impossible to tell which sherds came from the pit and which might have been associated with the brick structure.

9) The short report on the brief three-week excavation next to the Kuyunjik Gully in 1987 [Stronach 1987: 107–8] suggested a very different sequence with a structure of large stone slabs dated by pottery to the Neo-Assyrian period followed by four post-Assyrian levels and two Parthian levels.

In this connection, David Stronach has written to me with the following additional information: “the 1987 probes began outside the Gully, on the surface of the mound, at a point above and to the south of Augusta McMahon’s KG sounding. Here Level 1 consisted of a substantial mud-layered platform with a depth of at least 3 meters. The associated pottery suggested a late Parthian date. There was no inclination to dig through the same deposit a second time and for this reason the 1989 Sounding was placed entirely within the Gully’s inner, northern limit. There is also every reason to think that the ‘baked brick pavement laid over the remains of the...disused pit’ (McMahon’s Level I) is contemporary with a number of baked brick pavements which were encountered further to the south in 1987. The latter pavements (labelled as Level 2 in 1987) stood directly beneath the mud-platform and were associated with pottery that suggested a Hellenistic or mid-Parthian date. This information anchors the sequence in the McMahon Sounding to the surface of the mound and to one of the only two adjacent levels of occupation — Level 2 — that was in any real sense excavated (even if only in a very limited way) during the short 1987 season.

“Unfortunately, each of the four ‘post-Assyrian’ floors that I thought I could detect (in section only) below Level 2 were no longer to be seen following the floods and mud-slides that took place in the southern arm of the Gully during the winters of 1987 and 1988. Accordingly, I advise against any continuing faith in that construct. At the same time the fact that some Neo-Assyrian sherds were to be seen at a still deeper point in the Gully — presumably washed down from a level well above the large Akkadian (?) stone slabs (perhaps contemporary with McMahon’s Level VII) on which I originally noted them [cf. Stronach 1987:108] — is of interest in itself.”

It thus seems that, since in 1987 the ‘structure of large stone slabs’ was thought to date to the Neo-Assyrian period instead of to the Akkadian/Ur III period, the ‘post-Assyrian’ floors should in fact be dated to between the beginning of the 3rd millennium BC and the Parthian period. The supposition that these floors, which probably in part correspond to McMahon’s Levels II and III, should be dated to the ‘post-Assyrian’ period may have influenced McMahon to date these levels in the Parthian period.



and students and staff of the Institut für Vorderasiatische Archäologie of Munich University for their constructive criticisms of a draft of this article and to Cornelia Wolff for preparing the illustrations.

## References

- Ball, W.  
1987 "British excavations in the Abu Dhahir area 1985/6. Interim report", in *Researches on the antiquities of Saddam Dam Basin Salvage and other Researches* (State Organisation for Antiquities and Heritage, Baghdad): 78-81
- Bretschneider, J.  
1997 "'Nuzi-Keramik" aus der Unterstadt (Feld J)", in M. Lebeau and A. Suleiman (eds.), *Tell Beydar, Three Seasons of Excavations (1992-1994). A Preliminary Report* (Subartu 3): 231-243
- Curtis, J.E.  
1989 *Excavations at Qasrij Cliff and Khirbet Qasrij* (London)
- Curtis, J.E., and Green, A.R.  
1997 *Excavations at Khirbet Khatuniyeh* (London)
- Curtis, J.E., Green, A.R., and Knight, W.  
1987-8 "Preliminary report on the excavations at Tell Deir Situn and Grai Darki", *Sumer* 45: 49-53
- Debevoise, N.  
1934 *Parthian Pottery from Seleucia on the Tigris* (Ann Arbor)
- Duda, D.  
1978 "Die Keramik aus dem Gebiet des Gareus-Tempels", *Uruk Voläufigen Berichte* 28: 46-56
- Gerber, C.  
1997-8 "Der Beitrag Ninives zur nordmesopotamischen Chronologie", *Archiv für Orientforschung* 44/45: 226-235
- Hauser, S.R.  
1996 "The production of pottery in Arsacid Ashur", in K. Bartl and S.R. Hauser (eds.) *Continuity and Change in Northern Mesopotamia from the Hellenistic to the early Islamic Period* (Berliner Beiträge zum Vorderen Orient 17, Berlin): 55-85
- Ibrahim, J.K.  
1986 *Pre-Islamic Settlement in Jazira* (Baghdad)
- McKenzie, L.  
1997 "Discussion of pottery: Level 2", in Curtis and Green 1997: 91-94
- McMahon, A.  
1998 "The Kuyunjik Gully Sounding, Nineveh: 1989 & 1990 seasons", *al-Rāfidān, Journal of Western Asiatic Studies* 19 (1998): 1-32
- Numoto, H.  
1987 "Tell Fisna", in *Researches on the antiquities of Saddam Dam Basin Salvage and other Researches* (State Organisation for Antiquities and Heritage, Baghdad): 43-48
- Oates, D., and Oates, J.  
1959 "'Ain Sinu: a Roman frontierpost in Northern Iraq", *Iraq* 21: 207-402
- Oates, D., Oates, J., and McDonald, H.  
1998 *Tell Brak Excavations volume 1. The Mitanni and Old Babylonian Periods* (British School of Archaeology in Iraq)
- Pfälzner, P.  
1995 *Mittanische und mittelassyrische Keramik: Eine chronologische, funktionale und produktionsökonomische Analyse* (Berichte der Ausgrabung der Šeh Hamad/Dūr Katlimmu 3, Berlin)
- Postgate, C., Oates, D., and Oates, J.  
1997 *The Excavations at Tell al Rimah: The Pottery* (Iraq Archaeological Reports 4, British School of Archaeology in



Iraq)

Roaf, M.D.

1983 "A report on the excavations of the British Archaeological Expedition to Iraq in the Eski Mosul Dam Salvage Project from November 1982 to June 1983", *Sumer* 39: 68–94

Roaf, M.D.

1984 "Excavations at Tell Mohammed Arab in the Eski Mosul Dam Salvage Project", *Iraq* 46: 141–155

Summers, G.D.

n.d. *Middle Assyrian pottery from Tell Mohammed Arab* (unpublished ms)

Stronach, D.B.

1990 "Excavations at Nineveh, 1987", *Sumer* 46: 107–8

Tunca, Ö.

1987 *Tell Sabra* (Akkadica Supplementum V, Leuven)

Wilkinson, T., and Tucker, D.

1995 *Settlement Development in the North Jazira, Iraq: A Study of the Archaeological Landscape* (Iraq Archaeological Reports 3, British School of Archaeology in Iraq)



